

That Sinking Feeling

The streetlights had just come on as the evening began to dim, and they cast a filthy amber glow on the scene below: a woman's unconscious form lying on the pavement. Someone had placed a bright orange traffic cone on the sidewalk near her, as if to be sure that no one tripped over her. The street was slick with the recent rain, and the air hung heavy with an electric energy – it seemed another storm might break from the sky at any moment.

“Move on! Nothing to see here!” bellowed an officer, his black uniform stretched to a shine over his bulging stomach.

“Jeannie? Jeannie!” came a cry from half a block away.

An old man, stumbling in his haste, tried to push his way through a dozen passersby that had stopped to gawk. He was shorter than average, frail from age, and the small crowd of people was too much. He tripped and fell then, skinned a hole in the knee of his brown polyester pants.

“Jeannie ...” he whimpered.

He grasped his injured knee and was ashamed to find that hot tears were spilling down his cheeks, as if he were a two-year-old child gone skidding across the playground. He would've called for his mother, half-expecting her to come, but he had outwitted senility. At ninety-three, he had kept his mind sharp with daily crossword puzzles and every James Michener book he could get his hands on at the local library. His eyesight was still keen, though his hearing had gone to hell.

It was there, from his unfortunate position on the ground, that he glimpsed, through the ankles of the crowd in front of him, a corner of a red tartan skirt. He knew it to be his

Jeannie's, the plaid wool skirt that she wore every Wednesday, and he pictured the rest of the outfit in his mind: the ivory blouse with pearl buttons and a ruffle, pearl earrings (they had been his mother's, God rest her soul), and black boots that made him laugh every time she put them on, because they looked like something his grandfather would have worn. But she loved those boots, said they were the only things that didn't hurt her feet; and besides, she would remind him with a grin, they covered her puffy ankles. He shifted to the right then, and saw her feet, those leather boots. He involuntarily shivered, felt paralyzed for a moment, and then the scene in front of him really began to sink in. He was filled with a sense of urgency, which gave him what felt like the strength of a young man, and he pushed his way through the people still standing there like spectators at a side-show. He grew angry at their obvious display of rubbernecking, which made him all the stronger. He made his way to the front, and saw Jeannie lying there on the pavement, unmoving, eyes closed, glasses at her feet. He quickly made his way to Jeannie's side.

"Is she yours?" the cop asked gruffly.

The old man ignored the question, put his fingers to Jeannie's lips and was relieved to feel her breath.

"Hey, I'm talkin' to you. This lady your wife, or what?"

"Yes ... yes, my wife ... what happened?"

"She fell. That's all. Banged her head up something good, but she'll be fine. Got an ambulance comin' any minute. They'll take her to Mass General."

Jeannie opened her eyes then, and smiled.

"Tom ... I'm so sorry ..." she began, but he put his fingers to her lips again, this time to quiet her.

The ambulance pulled up then, in a whirl of lights and sirens. Jeannie began to cry, silently at first, and then great heaving sobs. The paramedics stepped in, lifted her body as if it were made of the hollow bones of a bird, and placed her on a backboard, securing her head and neck.

"Is that really necessary?" Tom spoke up, himself near to crying.

"It's standard procedure for possible head injury, sir. You coming with us?"

He followed the paramedics to the ambulance, climbed into the back of it behind the rest of them, ignoring his knee, although it hurt to bend it, and blood had seeped through the fabric of his pants.

Several hours later, after Jeannie had endured a litany of medical tests, the doctor broke the news. There was a spot on Jeannie's brain – perhaps a large blood clot, perhaps something else. He would need to do an MRI in order to better assess the situation. But it was most likely the cause of Jeannie's fall. She didn't remember anything from right before the fall; she only remembered going down, and an accompanying grayness, as if the world were growing dim, but not completely black. She felt it again now, as she stared blankly at the doctor. She felt herself begin to sink, and a sick feeling washed over her. She reached out a hand to grasp Tom's own. He squeezed her hand, and the sinking sickness slipped away.

It was Tom who began to sink, when, an hour after they brought Jeannie back from the MRI, the doctor came back.

"Mister Frost," he began, "This is Dr. Vinogradsky; he's an oncology specialist," the doctor explained, gesturing to another man who stood at his side, looking unintentionally ominous in his dark suit and crisp white coat.

The specialist spoke then, his Russian accent dancing just behind his words.

"The spot on your wife's brain is not a blood clot at all."

Tom felt Jeannie begin to drift away again as the doctor spoke the diagnosis. He had always been able to feel that kind of thing from her – it was how he knew she was hurt on the street that day. He had been in the kitchen of their run-down brownstone apartment; he had been about to take the tea kettle off of the stove, just before it whistled. But he had felt Jeannie then, felt her go down, and he nearly ran from the apartment. He clambered down the greasy dank stairs, out to the street below. He didn't have to go far; she was two blocks from home when it happened.

"Jeannie?" he whispered now, and he realized then what people meant when they said that their life flashed before their eyes. Only it wasn't him that was dying, it was Jeannie. He felt guilty for assuming that she would die; felt a terrible grief and loss as though she were already gone. He saw his entire life, not just the years with Jeannie, but everything. He

remembered the custard his mother used to feed him in his high chair when he was barely two years old. The old iron meat grinder, its vice gripped onto the kitchen counter, that she used to make ham salad when the church ladies came for lunch on Friday afternoons. The cat—that awful Siamese—which hissed and clawed at him whenever he tried to pet it. Mother was never sympathetic when he got a scratch, even though he cried; she simply cleaned it and bandaged it and said “You ought to have stayed away from that cat!” He remembered the old water pump in the back yard. It still worked when he lived there; he would pump and pump and then fill a cup full of the cool well water to quench his thirst after he had played in the golden wheat fields all day.

“Tom? Tom ... I ...” Jeannie began to speak, and it drew Tom back to the present.

“We’ll be okay. Don’t worry about a thing,” Tom reassured her, though he had no idea how long a ninety-year-old woman might survive brain cancer.

“It won’t be long now,” the ER doctor said, and Tom panicked for a moment, until he realized that the doctor was not talking about Jeannie’s death.

“We’ll admit her overnight, see about scheduling that surgery. We’ll have you in a room soon.”

And the two men in white coats walked out, leaving Jeannie and Tom alone in a room rippling with unspoken grief.

It was nine months later that Jeannie died. The same amount of time it takes to grow a new life was the time it took for one life to fade out. Tom felt it when she died, though he was regrettably not at her side. He felt her slip away, just as he was putting on his socks in the other room. He walked down the hall, one sock still dangling from his hand, and steadied himself for a moment on the door-frame before entering the bedroom, which had as of late been turned into a hospital room.

“I want to die at home, Tom, not in some rotten hospital,” she had blurted out one evening, the lamplight making her face appear more sunken than it was.

“And I don’t want any of those hospice strangers in our home either,” Jeannie had continued, “And no more of this chemotherapy. It’s for the birds.”

Tom’s stomach had lurched, as it always did when Jeannie spoke of her impending

death, especially with such seeming nonchalance. He hadn't said anything in response to his wife that night, had simply gone to her and wrapped her in his arms. He could give her that much, she had said. And indeed he did, without regret, for it was all he had to give.

He gradually grew desensitized to the fact that his bedroom was now a hospital room; but on this particular morning, the sight of the hospital bed in the spot where their antique sleigh bed used to sit filled him with horror. The night table was covered with bottles of pills, its drawers stuffed with adult diapers. She looked so frail, and just like a small child; he went to her, pulled the blanket back up over her shoulders and tucked her in. He put two fingers to her lips, felt no breath. He reached up and gently closed her eyes. He made the phone call then, and he hated the way he could feel his dry lips curl around the words "she's dead."

After they had come and taken her body, he sat there staring at the empty hospital bed, its sheet still rumpled. He felt numb and raw at the same time, and was without a single idea as to what he should do next. He finally stood up from the chair, but remained motionless, just standing there, staring, for what seemed like an hour but was really only minutes. Tom crossed the room and lay down on the bed with its thin white sheet curved into the shape of Jeannie, like a shroud; and he curled himself up on his side, with his hands tucked beneath his chin. And he slept, for four long, deep hours. He dreamed of Jeannie, and woke to find his pillow and his face wet with tears. It wasn't a spectacular dream, some epic dream awash in colors and people. It was just Jeannie, as he would like to remember her, sitting at the bus stop, the same one where they had met sixty-four years ago. In his dream, the sun was shining lazily, and the No. 16 bus to Cambridge Square pulled up. Jeannie got on, waving at him, smiling sweetly. He begged to go with her, but she shook her head.

"You're not ready," she offered as a cryptic explanation, and gestured to Tom's feet. So he blew kisses to her as the bus pulled away, then sat back down on the bench, realizing, with some mixture of sadness and bemusement, that he had on only one sock.